

“REEL THEOLOGY – MARRIAGE STORY”

By Rev. Victor Kim

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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I can't recall how many weddings I have officiated at and used the text just read from Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth. It's called the love chapter and contains some of the most famous words from all of scripture.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... if I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing... love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude... it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Until it doesn't, right?

If we could love like the text says love should be, our world would look very different than it does. Our lives would look very different from the way they do. I suppose though that a wedding day would be the best of days to speak about this kind of love, even though the text was never really meant to be about a romantic love between two people, more on that later. Of all the days, though, the wedding day should be one in which the ideal of love could at least be imagined. **Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.** Dressed in your best suit and that beautiful dress, it almost seems within reach. But life is not a fairy tale and marriages move on from those early days of bliss, infatuation and spontaneous delight.

There's a lot of complexity and complications in our relationships and there aren't always endings where everyone gets to live happily ever after. Even in the best relationships that endure, we have to admit that there's a lot of cosmetics and compromises that work to cover up some deep blemishes under the surface.

Love doesn't always work out, at least not in the way we plan. That's one of the themes in the movie *Marriage Story*, our movie this morning in our series of Academy Award nominated films. It's nominated for 6 Academy Awards, including Best Picture and both lead actors Scarlett Johansson and Adam Driver are nominated in their categories. It's directed by Noah Baumbach who has said that his own divorce from his wife, the actress Jennifer Jason Leigh, played some part in the development of the story. Though it's called *Marriage Story*, it's a story about a marriage that is ending, leading to a divorce.

At the beginning of the movie we hear the voices of Charlie and Nicole, a married couple living in New York, speaking about what they love about the other. It's effusive, there's so much they love and admire about each other. But then we realize that these words are from notes that they have written as part of their counselling sessions as they work through their separation and move toward divorce. Ultimately Nicole refuses to share what she's written about Charlie and Charlie doesn't get the chance to speak own his words to Nicole.

From the beginning of the movie we realize that the story of this marriage is in trouble, headed for an unhappy ending. The movie documents the troubling and often sad journey of two people who initially agree to work everything out

amicably, without lawyers, trying to put their son Henry first, to an increasing animosity and distrust as they choose to involve others, including lawyers, **whose first act is to get Charlie and Nicole to stop thinking about what the other wants and focus on what they want.** The story descends into anger, spite, hatred and fear as the initial intentions are all but forgotten and the mounting frustrations and hurt explode in one particular scene where words are spoken that should never be uttered and trust is shattered in ways which will never be mended. Let's take a look at the trailer.

(Go to YouTube and search for MARRIAGE STORY, TRAILER)

Great movies tell compelling stories, stories that have the power to move us to look deeper, sometimes at things in our world, often in ourselves. Part of what makes Marriage Story a great movie is that it's honest, it's honest about how hard and painful love can be at times and how it's that way for us. **Part of what makes stories compelling is that we recognize ourselves in it.** There's something of Nicole that many women will connect with. She's successful but she's also sacrificed a lot. She's repressed her wants for her family, for Charlie. She's moved from L.A. to New York to be with him. There's a scene when she's meeting with her lawyer for the first time and as she recounts her history with Charlie, Nicole says that as their relationship progressed, **she found herself getting smaller.** "I never really came alive for myself", Nicole says, **"I was just feeding his aliveness."**

And now she's trying to fix that, she's moving back to L.A. with Henry. And Charlie's the kind of guy who just assumes that what he wants is what the family wants, what Nicole wants. He's brilliant, driven to be successful, not only for himself but he believes also for Nicole, and when he finds out that what she wants isn't what he's assumed all along, living in New York, working in their theatre company, he's at a complete loss. **And to his bewilderment, he can't seem to find a solution that will work because there just isn't one.**

It's not easy to talk about divorce, especially in the church. But again, our lives are not fantasies and many marriages can't find a solution that will work. I was brought up in a family and within a theological belief that people stayed married no matter what. Divorce is painful, we recognize that. But I've lived long enough and seen too much to know that it wouldn't be honest to claim that God wants people to stay together, **no matter what.** It's not honest about our reality and really **not about what God intends either.** Marriage is to be a covenantal relationship, but a marriage isn't covenantal and doesn't honour God or God's intention for it when it's abusive, when it's manipulative, when it's built on infidelity or coerciveness or power. While not ideal, as people who live with the reality of sin, even Jesus acknowledges our fragility around marriage.

So, does this all mean that we should just give up, just stop trying to build marriages that last, stop working to create a love that can endure difficulties and the storms of life? **Of course not!**

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth the words from our text this morning, he wasn't addressing the issue of marriage. **He was, however, very much addressing the idea of love.** The words Paul writes were written to a Christian community in Corinth that was beset with turmoil and trouble. The Corinthians were a divided community, many factions each claiming to follow their own leader.

There was a level of immorality that would even shock us today, or as Paul puts it, a kind that is not even found among pagans, for a man is living with his father's wife. Lawsuits among believers were common and to top things off, they abused the Lord's Supper! While Christian communities were to gather together to share in a meal to remember what Jesus had done, when the Corinthians gathered together there was no sharing of any kind. Each of you goes ahead without waiting for anyone else, charges Paul. One remains hungry and another gets drunk! It is to this broken and fractured community that Paul writes words of encouragement. We are many, but we are all part of one body, says Paul. We all have different gifts, some as apostles, some as prophets or teachers and so on. Not everyone has the same gifts. Finally, Paul says, **I will show you a still more excellent way.** Then he begins his famous chapter on love.

Do you get it?

It's not to a healthy, whole, united community that Paul writes about love. His words aren't aimed at a people who would be full of hope and expectation like a beautiful bride and her groom on their wedding day. **No, Paul's words about love are spoken to a community torn apart by division, marked by hostility and**

selfishness and immorality. Paul's exhortation on love is for a people who are broken, a community that is at its wit's end. **And it is to this broken people that Paul writes, look, what good is eloquence, what use is knowledge, or even sacrificial actions, if you don't have love? If you don't have love, it's just noise, it's nothing.**

But you don't tell a broken people to just love one another, that all you need is love. Paul isn't telling the Corinthians to try harder, to dig deeper. **The love Paul speaks of isn't a love that the Corinthians can conjure up on their own.** The love Paul speaks of, the love Paul wants the church at Corinth to strive for, **is the love of God, love that comes only as a gift.** It is God's love that is ultimately always patient and always kind. It is God's love that is never envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. God's love does not insist on its own way or is irritable or resentful or rejoices in wrongdoing. God's love rejoices in the truth and it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. God's love never ends, never fails.

The Corinthians are to strive for this love, this love that comes as a gift from God, **as hope in the midst of a broken world.** If there is to be healing, it will come because we will know this love of God in our lives and we will strive to share that love with one another. I said that this love can only be known as a gift from God. We come to know this gift when we realize how much we are loved by God by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. **We come to know it when we accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour and turn, repent and reorient our lives in a new direction.**

We know it when we understand that despite what others may say about us, even those who are supposed to love us, what God says about us never changes because of self-interest or the pressure of others. What God says about us isn't conditional and isn't based on reciprocity, that God will only love us if we love God. **No, God's love for us assures us that despite how broken we are, in spite of our sinfulness, God will love us, God's kindness and patience will endure without fail, without end.**

Now, when we know this love, does it mean that all our problems will be solved? Hardly. Our lives and our loves are too complex to be so easily rectified. But if we know this love and if we will try to share this love with those around us, those we love, then at least the possibility of healing and hope exist. Paul acknowledges that for now, we see in a mirror, dimly... for now we only know in part. But once we know this love, we are to strive to love in the same way until the complete comes, until we come to know fully, even as we have been fully known.

Our stories don't always have happy endings, but sometimes there are slivers of hope. At the very end of the movie, after the divorce has been finalized, Charlie visits Los Angeles to be with Henry and he tells Nicole that he's accepted a residency at UCLA to direct two plays. He goes into the bedroom where Henry is practicing his reading. Charlie soon realizes that Henry is reading from Nicole's words about what she loves about him that she refused to share at the counselling session at the beginning of the movie. He ends up reading the final part himself, choking up in tears. Nicole has been standing at the doorway,

unbeknownst to Charlie, in tears herself listening to the words she once wrote, words that are still true in some way.

The movie ends with hope, it ends with love, not a fairy tale love, not a love that magically brings Charlie and Nicole back together, **but a love that will hopefully encourage them to find a new way forward.** But again, I want to reiterate, if a great film can tell a story that compels us to go deeper in ourselves, **what might the love of God do?**

Remember, this love that God has for us, this love that comes as a gift from God, is a love that took on the whole brokenness of our world, **all our sin and fears, all the darkness and death that threatens our aliveness** and overcame it all, for all time. Maybe we wish that someone would have written a letter to us about how much they loved us like Charlie and Nicole did for each other. Maybe if we knew we were so loved, it might inspire us. **Well, someone did, and it goes way beyond anything anyone of us could ever put down on paper.**

We know how much God loves us, crazy Corinthians and Richmondites alike. We have seen how much God loves us in Jesus Christ and his sacrificial gift of love on the cross. In a world where love is so desperately needed, where patience and kindness are always in short supply, **what might the love of God known in us, received in us, inspire us to do?**

It's the most compelling story ever told, the story of God's love for us. May the story of God's love, unchanging, unconditional, move us to look deeper, in us

and at the world around us, that we would live as a people of faith, hope and love.

Thanks be to God, Amen!

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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